

PLANNING BRIEFS

Amherst, Massachusetts

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PLANNING AMHERST TOGETHER WORK GROUPS & COMMUNITY

In January, seven Work Groups formed to focus on elements of the Comprehensive Plan required by the State of Massachusetts. The Work Groups are: Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Natural & Cultural Resources, Open Space & Recreation, Services & Facilities, and Circulation. Around 80 Amherst residents are Work Groups members; they have had support from Town staff, as well as citizen consultants who have been willing to share their expertise. Since the beginning of the year the Groups have met on a regular basis. The first task was to develop goals and objectives based on the public input received from the Fall Idea Gatherings. A Land Use Concept also needed to be developed to determine priority areas for new development, redevelopment, and conservation.

The Comprehensive Planning Committee and Work Groups received feedback on the progress during the Community Choices workshop held March 29th at Amherst High School. The event was open to the public and advertised widely through mailings, emails, flyers, the newspaper, etc. It was attended by 150 people, and almost 75% of the attendees had also gone to the Idea Gatherings in October. Community Choices started with a presentation by consultants ACP who provided an update on the process, and shared findings on existing conditions and trends. Following this, participants had the opportunity to review, rate, and comment on, the draft goals, objectives, and land use principles.



Community Choices Photos by Alan Root



The results indicated general support for the intent of the goals and principles. All of the draft goals received average ratings or 3.9 or higher on a scale of 1-5, where 5 equals strongly support. Only two draft land use principles received average ratings lower than 4. In both cases, the lower ratings were mainly due to the need to clarify terminology or meaning. Goals have been further revised by the Work Groups and the next step will be to develop strategies that will support the realization of the goals.

Workshop attendees also participated in a "Future Vision Assessment" exercise. This provided an opportunity to evaluate physical conditions in the community by scoring and commenting on a series of images.

Stay up to date by visiting www.planningamhersttogether.org. Also on the website you can review the comments from Community Choices by checking out the Comment Collector.

DRAFT GOALS

Economic Development: Strengthen, diversify and grow the tax base and employment opportunities in the town through smart development in the downtown, village centers, and industry zones. Focused initiatives will broaden our economic base in clusters of businesses, mixed services, high technology/clean industries, cultural attractions, education, tourism, and agricultural resources. Such development will leverage our existing educational institutions, the town's diverse character and committed citizenship, which maintaining, improving, and sustaining quality of life, ecological consciousness, and social values.

Housing: Provide a mix of affordable housing that meets the physical and economic needs of the full spectrum of our community.

Land Use: A sustainable attractive town with a vibrant Downtown and viable mixed use Village Centers that are well connected with livable and diverse neighborhoods and campuses, and interwoven with protected open space, natural resources, and active farmland.

Natural and Cultural Resources: Preserve and enhance our natural and cultural resources to foster a vibrant and diverse community life.

Open Space and Recreation: Protect and enhance our rural character and agricultural viability, and provide and develop multi-generational recreational opportunities that bring townspeople together.

Services and Facilities: Provide excellent accessible facilities services, and programs reflecting values respectful of our ages and our diversity, which, through collaboration, contribute to a high quality, safe, civil, healthy, and sustainable community.

Transportation and Circulation: A balanced, inclusive, accessible, safe, environmentally responsible transportation and circulation system that serves users of public transit, pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers, and that is connected within and

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FORM-BASED ZONING— AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Zoning is the primary way in which communities regulate development. The original rationale for the development of zoning was based upon a need to separate different kinds of land uses (industrial and residential for instance) to protect public health, safety, and welfare. But what was once a solution to dangerous living conditions is now considered to be a major contributing factor to dysfunctional and sprawling development. Low-density sprawl is the most expensive pattern for delivering municipal services, it is unsupportive of public transit and pedestrian infrastructure, and it reinforces reliance on the private auto. Sprawling development patterns reinforce an unsustainable way of life and consumption of resources.

While community development patterns have adapted to changing technology and social factors (i.e. automobile use), the basic approach to zoning has remained static. To deal with new and more complex issues, layers have been added to zoning regulations, making them more complicated but still creating environments that are less than ideal. Many in the field of planning have realized it may be time to move beyond incremental revisions to a more fundamental and integrated approach.

Communities across the country are beginning to turn to form-based zoning codes as one solution. The basic premise is that the regulation of physical form (not land use) is a key to producing a better built environment. While “form” may imply a built urban environment, rural landscapes, farmland, and preserved open space also have distinctive forms and form-based codes can be used in these places, too. Form refers to those features of buildings and landforms that define the shape and influence the function of a landscape (i.e. height, position, massing). Land uses and densities would still be regulated, but they would become subject to the form of the desired outcome.

Initially, form-based codes were developed as a set of instructions for developers to use in developing greenfield (previously undeveloped) sites and planned unit developments. These developments often took place at the edge of the growing suburban fringe in southern states. These codes required that new development and expansion of existing homes be compatible with the largely New Urbanist ideas of specific project developers. More recently, form-based codes have been adopted by existing communities across the United States both in large cities and small towns. These codes have been applied to new development, downtown revitalization, corridor revitalization, etc. It is important to remember that every place has its own unique character to be preserved, celebrated, and where and when appropriate built upon. No matter what the setting, codes can be written to protect or transform a place.

Form-based codes ask the question, “What does the community want to look like?” and then work backwards from there, creating regulations that will produce the desired result. Form-based codes fulfill a specific physical vision for a place, a vision that has been based on broad public consensus. Code development involves identifying “good” streets and public spaces, and then writing rules to get more of what people want and less of what they don’t want. Which neighborhood patterns should be retained and protected? Which should be replaced with something better? What should that “something better” look like? Form-based codes are also contextual—that is, they look to the preferred characteristics of the surrounding environment for guidance in regulating the physical form of new development. These codes focus on describing what’s desirable rather than listing what’s forbidden, and they are nonetheless regulatory rather than advisory in nature. In terms of the design of buildings or sites, current zoning often effectively tells developers, “You can pretty much do whatever you want, as long as you follow these general rules about size, parking, etc. and don’t try to do an X, a Y or a Z”. Form-based codes approach it the other way around. They allow a community to tell developers: “If you want to build here, this is what we want we want it to end up looking like. Within that range, you can do an A, a B, or a C. We still don’t want you to do an X, a Y or a Z.”



New buildings in downtown Saratoga Springs, New York created under the City’s form-based code.

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The predictability of this technique can ensure that as the physical environment develops, it reflects the community’s master plan goals. It allows the regulations to attract certain desirable changes rather than merely controlling whatever development is proposed through the permitting procedures. A large reason for the growing success of form-based coding is its ability to support balanced planning and regulation making. Form-based codes also remove regulatory obstacles to mixed-use development, establish clear and objective standards for design, and can have an improved approval process.

“The desire for community is a constant of human nature.”

—Steven Price

CHECK OUT AMHERST ON GOOGLE EARTH!

Town Hall, Bart's Ice Cream, the Amherst Cinema Building, and other favorite places of Amherst residents can now be seen in 3D on Google Earth! In 2006, a 3D model of the downtown was built by the consulting firm Green Mountain Geographics using the software programs of SketchUp and ArcScene. Google recently purchased SketchUp and created a 3D Warehouse which enables anyone to create and submit 3D geographic content. The 3D content in the Warehouse can then be displayed for free on Google Earth. Amherst is now up there along with international cities across the globe on the Google 3D Warehouse "Cities in Development" page at:

<http://sketchup.google.com/3dwarehouse/cities.html>

3D models can serve as a very powerful planning tool, and the 3D Warehouse provides an additional opportunity to share the Amherst model at no extra cost with a much wider community. Try 3D modeling for yourself by downloading the basic version of SketchUp (which is free) and modeling your home or business! Then place it in Google Earth to see it's in context!



STAFF SPOTLIGHT: CAROLYN HOLSTEIN

Carolyn Holstein serves as the Assistant to the Zoning Board of Appeals. When she joined the Planning Department in May of 2003, she was no stranger to town government. She had been a Town Meeting Member for fifteen years, and also served on a variety of boards and committees including the Select Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals. While on the Select Board, Carolyn was the liaison for the Solid Waste and Recycling Committee. Her interest in the topic evolved and she later took on the position of Amherst Recycling Coordinator. Carolyn has also been a volunteer on the Friends of Jones Library Board, and for the organizations A Better Chance (ABC), and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. She has also tutored in the Amherst schools and with the group Round the World Women.

Carolyn has lived in Amherst since 1971. She has enjoyed living in Amherst because of the cultural activities, the resources provided by the higher education institutions, and the liberal nature of the community. She likes the strong farmland preservation efforts and she values being in close proximity to rural areas from her upbringing in a small town.



Carolyn grew up in Beaver, Pennsylvania - a town of about 5,000 residents in the western part of the State. She went to Pittsburg to attend Carnegie Mellon University where she earned her Bachelor's degree in Math and Psychology, and a Master's in Social Psychology. From there she moved with her husband to Princeton, New Jersey where she applied her psychology training by working in a mental health hospital. In 1971, Carolyn moved on to Amherst where she worked for the Computer Department at Smith College, and then she spent eighteen years helping to conduct research in Social Psychology at the University of Massachusetts. Carolyn has two sons who grew up in Amherst and attended the public schools. Her eldest, Jeremy, currently lives in Boston and works in the computer industry, and her younger son Jessie, is a violinist who resides in Providence, Rhode Island.

Despite a recent knee surgery, Carolyn has not slowed down much. She is the presently the President of the Amherst Club, a service organization which raises money for local groups through a number of events and activities. She also keeps busy tending to her home garden on East Leverett Road, and playing the organ for two Unitarian churches in the area.

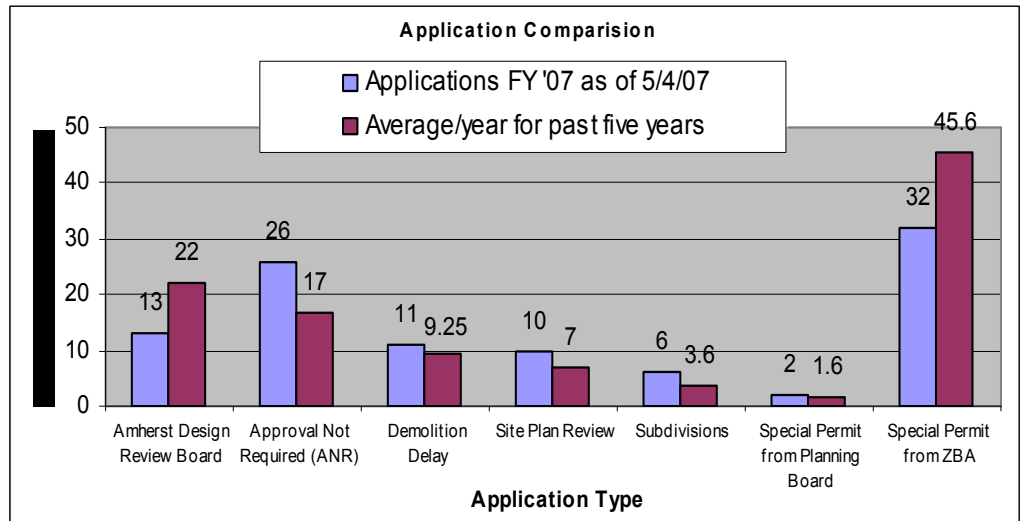
Like much of the psychology work she has done, Carolyn likes the problem-solving aspect of her current position. She often explains the application process and helps shepherd people through that process. She finds learning about the legal aspects of zoning to be quite interesting. She also notes that the department staff work together very well, despite the workload.

"We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give."
- Winston Churchill

APPLICATIONS IN FISCAL YEAR '07

As of May 4, in Fiscal Year 2007, the Planning Board has reviewed 6 subdivision plans, conducted 10 Site Plan Reviews, and endorsed 26 Approval Not Required (ANR) applications. With almost two months still left to go in Fiscal Year '07, these application numbers are already greater than the averages of the past five years. ANR applications have had the highest increase and are up 53%. There have been 2 applications for Special Permits from the Planning Board, which is consistent with the average of 1.6 per year over the past five years. There have been a total of 11 Demolition Delay applications, reviewed by the Historic Commission so far this year; this number is slightly up from the average of 9.25 in the past five years. The Zoning Board of Appeals has reviewed 32 applications for Special Permits. This number is down from the average of the past five years by 32%. This year special permit applications have been most frequently for- new commercial establishments (18.75%), supplementary apartments (12.5%), and for flag lots (9.4%).

For cases filed in Fiscal Year 2007 there has been an average of 1.9 ZBA meetings per case— while in some cases a decision can be made in the first meeting, other cases have taken up to eight meetings to decide. Four years earlier in 2003, a case on average would take 1.2 meetings, with some cases at max taking 3 meetings for a decision. Site Plan Review applications filed in Fiscal Year 2007 have on average taken 1.25 Planning Board meetings, this number is up from 2003 when the average was one meeting. So far only one subdivision (South Middle Street) has been approved in Fiscal Year 2007. Five other subdivision applications are currently in continuance and so far these applications have been heard at between 1 and 5 meetings. The number of subdivisions this year, as well as the number of meetings it takes for a decision has also increased from 2003.



BOARD & STAFF NEWS

The **Planning Board** is actively seeking new board members. One Board seat is currently vacant and others will be ending on June 30. If you are interested in an unparalleled opportunity to serve and help shape your community, please fill out a Citizen Activity Form on the Town's Website.

Jonathan Shefftz has recently joined the Planning Board. Jonathan and his wife Andrea moved to Amherst last spring. They live on newly-constructed Moody Field Road -- and are very grateful for the Planning Board's approval of that subdivision! Jonathan is a financial economics consultant, and much of his work includes assessing municipal ability to pay for environmental expenditures, so he hopes that no local communities get into trouble with his clients at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Justice. His interest in local government started at an early age, as his aunt has for many years served on the Marblehead (MA) Zoning Board of Appeals and his mother was involved in congressional redistricting issues in his hometown of Binghamton, New York. His involvement in local government started with his involvement with the North Cambridge Stabilization Committee where he led his neighbors in a lawsuit challenging the legality of a variance that had been granted to a developer. The lawsuit was successfully settled out of court. Jonathan has an undergraduate degree in economics and political economy from Amherst College, and a master's degree in public policy from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He enjoys hiking and biking, but especially skiing—he is a member of the ski patrol at Northfield Mountain.

In staff news, **Amy Lash**, who was an intern in the Planning Department during the 2006-2007 academic year, has finished her Master's degree in Regional Planning from the University of Massachusetts. She is moving east to work for the City of Salem's Department of Planning and Community Development.

Nathaniel Malloy has joined the Planning Department as an intern. Nate will be entering his final year at the University of Massachusetts where he is earning a dual Master's degree in Regional Planning and Landscape Architecture. He is a native of Greenfield and he wishes to stay in the area to help manage new growth -maintaining the balance between open space and development. He enjoys many outdoor activities in the Pioneer Valley, especially hiking and skiing.

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Planning Briefs is available on our website at <http://www.amherstma.gov/planning>
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